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AUTHOR	Lumsden, Linda S.
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ABSTRACT

The role of the school in the prevention of and intervention in child sexual abuse is examined in this digest. Information is provided on factors that affect recognition and reporting by school personnel; potential indicators of child sexual abuse, both behavioral and physical; issues related to allegations involving school employees; the effectiveness of prevention programs; and ways of collaborating with social service agencies. A conclusion is that the school is part of a prevention plan at only one level; the ultimate challenge lies in confronting the social attitudes and conditions that foster or tolerate child sexual abuse. (14 references) (LMI)

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The Role of Schools in Sexual Abuse Prevention and Intervention

by Linda S. Lumsden

The school is the one social institution outside the family with which nearly all children have consistent, ongoing contact. Therefore, it is particularly well-suited for identifying endangered children, including those who are being sexually maltreated. Today, many schools are striving to become more effective participants in prevention and intervention efforts designed to reduce the complex problem of child abuse.

What Factors Affect Recognition and Reporting by School Personnel?

Teachers are empathetic toward abused children, but fear and lack of knowledge may make them hesitant about reporting abuse (Thomas McIntyre 1990). Although teachers are required by law to report suspected child abuse, most colleges allow teachers to become certified without exposure to child abuse curricula. In one survey, 81 percent of teachers reported receiving no preservice information about abuse and neglect, and 66 percent said they had not been given any inservice education in this area (McIntyre 1987).

Lack of adequate training hinders teachers' ability to detect all types of abuse, but it may especially impair their ability to recognize sexual abuse, since most victims manifest no obvious external signs.

In a study that asked teachers about their knowledge of various forms of abuse, only 4 percent of the polled teachers stated that they were "very aware" of the signs of sexual abuse. Another 17 percent said they would be able to recognize signs that were "very obvious," while 75 percent reported that they would not recognize signs at any point (McIntyre).

Even when sexual abuse is suspected, however, it is not always reported to child protective services. Bonnie Trudell and Mariamne Whatley (1988) note, "The reporting philosophy of the school principal has been found to exert an important influence on teacher reporting [of sexual abuse]. Where a principal encourages it, teachers are more likely to report; where principals are reluctant to report (frequently for reasons related to maintaining good parental relations and school image), teachers report less often."

A teacher's emotional response to the issue of child sexual abuse also can affect his or her tendency to report. Because many people find it difficult to comprehend that anyone would sexually victimize children, there is a tendency to deny that the problem exists.

Some teachers also may be reluctant to report suspected abuse because they are unaware that if they make a report in "good faith," they have immunity from civil or criminal liability. Providing employees with the opportunity to discuss and ask questions about their school's policies and procedures will facilitate both understanding and compliance (Joy Rogers 1988).

What Are Some Potential Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse?

Several emotional and behavioral difficulties are commonly observed in children who are being sexually abused. Of course, just because a child exhibits some of these, educators must not automatically jump to the conclusion that the child is being sexually abused. Often signs are ambiguous; other stressors in a child's life can produce similar symptoms.

Specific signs that *may* indicate sexual abuse include regressive behaviors such as thumbsucking, enuresis (bed wetting), and nightmares; sleep disturbances; persistent, inappropriate sexual play with self, peers, or toys; knowledge of sexual behavior (often evident in drawings) that is advanced for the child's age; poor peer relationships; overly compliant behavior; acting-out behavior such as delinquency or aggression (often seen in children who attempted to get help but received none); pseudo-mature behavior; school-related difficulties including an inability to concentrate, faltering school performance, reluctance to change clothes for gym class or to participate in physical activities, and arriving at school early and staying late; running away from home; suicidal thoughts or attempts; and sexual promiscuity or avoidance of relationships (Deborah Tharinger and Ellen Vevier 1987).

Other possible indicators of sexual abuse include pain, itching, bleeding, torn or stained clothing; withdrawal (some children may retreat into a fantasy world or appear retarded); drug/alcohol abuse; and indirect allusions to problems at home (for example, a child may tell a teacher "I'm afraid to go home tonight" or "I want to come live with you") (Oregon Health Division 1987).

Abused children sometimes present information in a piecemeal fashion to test an adult's response to what they share. Therefore, it is vital for teachers and other school personnel to be provided with training not only in detecting possible abuse but in responding to intentional and accidental disclosure by children.

What Issues Relate to Allegations Involving School Employees?

Allegations of sexual misconduct involving school employees and students have been increasing (Martha McCarthy 1989). When William Bridgeland and Edward Duane (1990) interviewed principals in Canada and the U.S., they found that "it is not an accusation of physical abuse that [principals] fear, rather, it is charges of sexual abuse which are the focus of most concern."

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Cases of physical or sexual abuse involving school personnel have raised the issue of whether schools are liable for employees' actions. As McEvoy states, "The legal principle of 'respondent superior' suggests that, under certain circumstances, agents who hire and supervise can be liable for the actions of employees. However, it is not clear how this principle applies to situations where staff clearly violate stated policy by their abusive actions."

Rogers suggests that school administrators may be inadvertently exposing staff members to the threat of allegations by asking them to drive a single child somewhere or by allowing a teacher with an out-of-the-way office to work with children individually. Some principals in Bridgeland and Duane's study reported that their staffs are refusing to be put in what they consider "compromising positions."

A joint statement on sexual abuse of children issued by the American Association of School Administrators and the National Association of State Boards of Education (1987) emphasizes that when a school employee is convicted of sexual abuse, states should disseminate information on the conviction to all public and private schools. The statement also encourages schools to participate in the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) Clearinghouse system for reporting revocations and suspensions of teaching certificates among states.

Are Prevention Programs Effective?

Educating children about how to protect themselves from being sexually abused through school-based prevention programs is viewed by some people as another viable tool that should be used in the fight against child sexual abuse.

Although some advocate prevention programs for children, others express reservations about the conceptual assumptions underlying some programs and voice concern about the lack of attention paid to program evaluation. Those who harbor concerns believe that well-intentioned programs may have undesirable effects on the children they are aimed at helping.

"In order to protect children," state Sherryll Kraiser and others (1989), "educators and parents need to know what works. Equally important, they need to know how to accomplish this end without compromising the children's emotional well-being." Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine with certainty whether prevention programs are effective in reducing children's vulnerability to sexual abuse. Children's knowledge and performance in simulated scenarios can be measured, but improvement in these areas following exposure to a prevention program is not necessarily predictive of how children will respond when they find themselves facing a real situation.

Since a majority of abusers are members of the child's family or other trusted adults—not strangers—a myriad of powerful psychological factors have a bearing on actual situations that play no part in simulated scenarios. We must recognize that it is extremely "difficult for a child to translate knowledge into behaviors when the sexual touching is done by a powerful and important person in the child's life" (John Leventhal 1987).

How Can Schools Collaborate with Social Service Agencies?

Child abuse in general and sexual abuse in particular is such a complex problem that no one sector of society can tackle it singlehandedly. Cooperation between school personnel and child protective services workers is vital, but the roles and authority of both organizations must be clearly understood before a collaborative relationship can develop. Designating a liaison person to provide continuity between these two organizations is one way of increasing mutual understanding (Haase and Kempe). Greg McClare (1990) advocates using a consultant or resource person "to be supportive and reassuring to both principals and staff facing a child-abuse crisis."

More schools are participating in community child protection teams, which many view as a "key to effective management of child abuse" (Haase and Kempe). Teams consist of relevant specialists such as educators, social workers, doctors, lawyers, police, and mental health professionals who work together in the areas of coordination, intervention, and supervision of child abuse cases. This type of team effort serves as "a 'risk management tool,' which serves to decrease the chances of error when encountering child abuse, because decision making is shared and second opinions are built into the framework of responding," states McEvoy.

Although schools have a key role to play in the fight against abuse, we should not forget that the problem must be confronted on many levels. Ultimately, the greatest challenge may lie in attempting to alter social attitudes and conditions that foster or tolerate the sexual abuse of children.

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